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The Catholic Church in East Timor by Robert Archer

When I recently visited Timor, all those whom I met agreed that the Catholic Church in East Timor is deeply respected by East Timor's people and exercises a profound influence on public opinion. In the brief time that is available, I will describe some of the reasons why I believe the local Church has come to play so important a role; and also say something about where it is in disagreement with the Indonesian State - as it is indeed with many Church officials in Jakarta and Rome.

First of all, however, let me quote from a Reflection written in July 1981 by East Timorese religious. This document was one of the first collective statements by Timorese clergy to become public; it was not written for publication; it was addressed to clergy and religious in Indonesia.

> "The people of East Timor are suffering," they wrote. "They feel themselves misunderstood, though knowing what is happening and aware that they are being humiliated. But they remain...very clear concerning their ideals."[...] "The East Timorese religious feel solidarity with the people and because of that feel obliged to express the people's experience of faith. This is even more so because they are in the midst of the people, [and] know the language, standards and heart of the people."
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> The statement went on: "We do not understand why the Indonesian church and the universal Roman church have up till now not stated openly and officially their solidarity with the Church, people and religious of East Timor. Perhaps this was the heaviest blow for us... We felt stunned by this silence that seemed to allow us to die deserted."

These sentences highlight two perceptions that have been central to the experience of the East Timorese clergy: the sense of privileged access to the intimate and hidden feelings of East Timor's people; and a painful and dehumanising solitude at a time of extreme need. These have been opposite forces - one positive, the other negative - acting on the identity of the local Church and both need to be understood if we are to understand its character and its relationship to Timorese nationalism.

From a colonial past

Isolation is not a new experience for East Timor, of course. It was the norm under Portuguese rule. Throughout the colonial period, and formally after Rome signed a Concordat in 1941 with the dictator Salazar, the

Catholic church was integrated within the colonial system. This was a foreign church. The majority of Timorese did not identify with it. In 1970, in fact, church statistics record that most people were animists; less than one third were Catholic.[1] East Timor has suffered many crises in its recent history, and it is a telling fact that when these occurred the majority of Church personnel left for Portugal. This was true, for example, when Japan occupied Timor during the Pacific War, and again during the conflict between UDT and Fretilin in 1975.

All this changed after the Indonesian invasion, however. The priests and religious who remained were not able to leave. Many went with the population into the mountains to escape the Indonesian army. Their Portuguese links were severed, and, influenced by the rise of nationalism in 1974-75, they were forced to build a new sort of church amid the carnage and destruction of the war. It was this experience that began to emerge in the early 1980s in the language of the Reflection quoted earlier.

What characterised the language of this "new" church? There was a emphasis on national identity and culture, on human rights, and on justice; and the Church itself was defined in terms of its service to the people, and explicitly not identified with the State. "Creating justice together with the present Indonesian government is not possible, or not yet, although the people desire justice greatly." [2]

It is also worth noting that it was in the same period [1981] that the Timorese clergy requested, and were given permission by Rome to worship in Tetum, after the Indonesian authorities sought to replace Portuguese with bahasa Indonesia.

In 1985, the East Timorese clergy took their thinking several stages further than the Reflection of 1981. In a document dated January 1 1985 that became the subject of considerable controversy, the Council of Priests explicitly supported the right of East Timor's people to self-determination. They spoke of the church being "witness to a process which is slowly leading to the ethnic, cultural and religious extinction of the identity of the people of East Timor," and protested in plain words at the numerous human rights' violations for which the Indonesian army had been responsible. Finally, they affirmed the importance of Timor's specific cultural heritage. "An attempt to Indonesianise the Timorese people... means the gradual murder of Timorese culture. To kill the culture is to kill the people." [3]

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1 Pro Mundi Vita, No 4/1984, p.1

2 Quoted in Pro Mundi Vita, 4/1984, page 25.

3 Quoted in Timor Link, 2, June 1985.

Rome : the international dimension

In short, in the early 1980s the Catholic church broke with its colonial past - and with the Indonesian authorities - and for the first time attached itself to the local culture, rather than the metropolitan power.

At the same time, however, the Church benefited from the peculiar and privileged relationship with Rome that it enjoyed following the invasion. East Timor being the subject of an international dispute, the Vatican did not attach the diocese to the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia or Portugal. Instead it was administered directly from Rome, as it still is today. This meant in practise that, throughout the period of East Timor's isolation between 1975 and 1989, the Catholic church was the only local institution that communicated independently with the outside world, maintained institutional connections with an international structure, and could therefore guard for itself a certain independence from the Indonesian authorities.

In fact, during the 1980s the Catholic church was willing, and was also able, to a far greater extent than any other Timorese institution (with the possible exception of the resistance movement) to defend threatened individuals and threatened values. The first Apostolic Administrator, Mgr da Costa Lopes, won great popular respect for his attempts to protect individuals from abusive treatment and his trenchant condemnation of corruption and human rights violations. When he was removed in 1983, his successor - now Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo - took up where he left off. In the mid 1980s Mgr Belo was put under enormous pressure by the authorities, who were embarrassed by the international and local publicity that the church's criticisms attracted. Mgr Belo was eventually persuaded, for example, to disown the Reflection of January 1 1985 that I have quoted above.

The Church has been for Timorese a source of spiritual solace in a society that has suffered a profound trauma. In addition, in a world overturned by war, it represents an important element of continuity. Finally, rarer still, it has offered a cultural space, a public place not occupied by the Indonesian authorities, a sense of liberty. It is striking that many of the public protests of recent months have been associated with religious events.

It is unsurprising, given these circumstances, that the great majority of Timorese opted for Catholicism when they were required to adopt a religion recognised by Pancasila. In the space of a few years, the proportion of nominal Catholics shot up from less than 30 per cent to more than 80 per cent - from approximately 180,000 in 1970 to over half a mllion in 1990. This growth added further institutional weight to the church, which could reasonably claim to represent the views of a majority of East Timor's people. But at the same time, it imposed huge new demands on the diocese and on church personnel that by the end of the 1980s, when the Pope visited and East Timor was "opened" up, had already transformed the local church.

Composition of the Church

Since Church growth has comfortably outpaced the number of Timorese training to work in the Church, beginning in the early 1980s Mgr da Costa Lopes and then Mgr Belo have both invited priests and other personnel from outside East Timor to fill the gap. In general, the Indonesian government is reluctant to permit foreign missionaries to work in Indonesia and, although some exceptions have been made in East Timor, an increasing proportion of church workers are now from various areas of Indonesia.

In fact, three groups can be distinguished. There are, first of all, the Timorese clergy. The majority are diocesan priests rather than members of religious orders. Most work in parishes south and west of Dili. It is often the case that they have less access to resources and educational opportunities than members of the missionary or religious orders. By general consent, the great majority share the nationalist views of Timor's people.

The Indonesian clergy and religious also compose a rather homogeneous group - but by contrast they generally accept the Indonesian government's official analysis according to which East Timor consented to join Indonesia by an act of self-determination in 1976.

The third group, of foreign missionaries and religious, is more diverse. It includes Italians, Spanish, Indians, Portuguese, Filipinos, Czechoslovakians, Mexicans etc. An influential but declining proportion began their service before 1975; but many have arrived more recently to work in new missionary areas - such as Suai, where the Claretians have recently established themselves. Most of the Eastern sector is in practise run by the Salesian Fathers, the order to which Mgr Belo belongs. [He is one of two Timorese members among more than 30 Salesian priests working in the territory.] While the political views of the foreign missionaries are naturally mixed, as a group they would fall between the Indonesian and Timorese clergy. In number, approximately 31 priests are from abroad, 32 from Indonesia and 26 from East Timor. Over one hundred sisters from eight orders are also working in East Timor.

A Divided Church?

Managing so disparate a body is no doubt one of the Bishop's most challenging tasks. But it is reasonable to ask in what respects this can be called a divided Church. On a wide range of matters I at least there was much common ground about what the people of East Timor need. Development, education, health care, better communications, contact with the outside world, employment, correction of abuses. I found considerable pragmatism in my discussions about all these matters, and open-mindedness about how such needs might be met.

The critical issue is the question of self-determination. On one side I detected virtual unanimity that self-determination is the eventual

legitimate and realizable goal. For the other, this aspiration was regarded as unrealistic, if not illegitimate. Anything like consensus seems virtually unachievable. The gap in perceptions is very wide and, of course, very strong emotions are naturally generated - particularly among the Timorese, who resent deeply the intolerance and lack of respect they detect among many incomers.

The important thing about this is that attitudes towards self-determination themselves determine the way that other issues are dealt with. They influence the way the Church works, and in the most practical ways to whom the church feels accountable. I began by quoting from the 1981 Reflection, which emphasised the Church's responsibility to serve the people, and its detachment from interests of State. The view from Indonesia would be very different. It is likely that priests and church workers will tackle problems of development or healthcare and even their basic pastoral work in radically different ways, according to whether they believe the problem of Timor is due to a fundamental deprivation of liberty or to backwardness and a difficulty of adaptation. Foreign priests too, for all they may sympathise with the Timorese, will conduct their parish affairs quite differently if they privately believe that Timorese aspirations are unrealistic.

It is clear from what I say above that different sections of the church, approaching their work from sharply different perspectives, will tend to pull the Church in different directions. This is one of the most obvious reasons for the contradictory and sometimes vacillating behaviour of church leaders. On this fundamental matter, this is a divided church... and I would have to add that, in the eyes of Timorese, it could again become a church that is partly foreign.

Dialogue or collusion

But this is only one part of the picture. For the Church is also engaged in a complex and direct relationship with the government. In the judgement of the local authorities - and no doubt Jakarta - the Catholic church is both one of the principal obstacles to achieving full pacification, and at the same time a vital player in the government's political strategy to achieve it. For its integration policy relies increasingly upon the effective delivery of government services - the provision of material resources that will efface the original traumatic imposition of Indonesian rule. The institution that can most effectively persuade the public to accept the government's services - in health, education and other areas - is unquestionably the Church, which therefore has to be brought onside.

Large benefits have already been offered to secure its goodwill. An obvious example is the new Cathedral, which was funded by, among other sources, gifts from the military budget and central government. It was reported to me that the local authorities have been unable to absorb the budget allocated to East Timor. The Church has similarly faced an equally political embarras de richesse.

It should also be noted that the Church has been brought in - as it has in other countries where there is similar conflict - to mediate between the Government and Fretilin. This too requires high qualities of political judgement, for the Church puts at risk its independence as well as its reputation for integrity.

On the one hand, the Church is using its undoubted influence and prestige to guide, improve and moderate official policies. At the same time, it risks becoming materially dependent upon its politically-interested benefactor. In spite of Richelieu, churchmen are not always good at such manoeuvres, and in Timor, where trust can be forfeited easily, it is a risky exchange.

I will finish with a comment and a note of caution. The comment is straightforward: I was struck on this, my first visit to East Timor, by the unbroken spirit of the people. After the experience they have been through, and some of the areas I visited suffered very greatly during the worst years of repression, I find this remarkable evidence of human resilience. The note of caution concerns the now famous letter that Bp Belo wrote to Senor Perez de Cuellar in March 1989, before the Papal visit in Octobr of that year. The letter was short and its content was simple: Bishop Belo stated what I am personally believe to be true, that the people of East Timor want, and are reasonable in wanting, to choose their government. The letter made no judgement in favour of one side or another, did not support either Portugal or Indonesia or independence. But when the modest demands of this letter became public, numerous official and also personal repudiations were organised, and the Bishop himself was harassed to the point of intimidation. This is perhaps evidence of his great influence on the people. But it also indicates the distance that must be travelled before one can begin to say that free speech and acceptable conditions of political life operate.

I should add, so that we who live abroad are not complacent, that he is still waiting for a reply from the United Nations.